

Arts 324
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Course Description

Arts 324 has been designed as a survey of the artistic accomplishments achieved within the time period covered in Humanities 324. This course satisfies the Arts and Ideas general education requirement.

We will examine the cultural artifacts produced during the historical period running from, roughly, 1840-1945. The emphasis of this course, however, will be placed on the emergence of modernism and the challenges posed by the ascendancy of the modern condition. In particular, we will spend roughly half of the course examining the contributions of Soviet artists during this period/

Works from the fields of art, music, poetry and literature will guide our study of the following question: what makes a work of art a work of art? Is art finished? What is the ultimate value of art, if any? How do different cultures respond to and produce modern art?

From literature, the work of Franz Kafka will further our understanding of the modernist challenge. From the field of music, we will listen to the works of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Nielsen, Janacek, Satie and many others. From the world of the visual arts, Rousseau, Kandinsky, Schiele, Monet and many others will be our compass points.

Because we will examine pieces of music and art in class, attendance is absolutely essential. **You have 2 absences for the entire semester.

Grading:

Two papers----50 percent
Daily Questions from the Readings—25 percent
Exams—25 percent

All work must be submitted, otherwise a grade of F will be given for the entire course, regardless of previous academic standing.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Shattuck, R—The Banquet Years

Ross, Alex—The Rest is Noise

Pelevin, V—The Yellow Arrow

Kafka, Franz—Metamorphosis

Kundera, M—Testaments Betrayed

Week One –Classical Ideas of Art/The Modernist Challenge

Week Two—Romanticism/Late Romanticism Ross, pgs 3-36

Week Three—The Birth of Modernism

Banquet Years pgs. 3-29

Henri Rousseau pgs 45-112

Week Four--Erik Satie—pgs 145-185

Week Five-- Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Debussy- Ross, pgs 36-130

Week Six--M Kundera Testaments Betrayed pgs 269=278. Pt 2 pgs 35-51
Ross, pgs 194-235 (Weill/Brecht)

Week Seven--Franz Kafka—Metamorphosis (entire novella)

Week Eight—Kundera, Pt 4, pgs 99-117 (Literature, translation and the modern self—
Freud)

Week Nine—Kundera, Pt 6, pgs 147-175 (Nietzsche, Hegel)

Week Ten— Music in Stalin's Russia—Ross pgs 235-284

Week Eleven—V Pelevin The Yellow Arrow

Week Twelve—Cold War and the Avante Garde of the Fifties—Ross pgs 387-447

Week Fourteen—Where is Art headed? Ross, pgs 515-589, Shattuck pgs 325-331

Week Fifteen-- Review

How to Listen to Music

Of all of the arts, music is at once the most experienced and yet least understood. It is an interesting irony. In general, people who claim to listen to music really do not do so, otherwise the problem of radical relativism would not haunt considerations of music in an objective sense. There is a *logic* to experiencing music. Music is not strictly about having a positive emotional reaction to what you hear. Difficult music is as interesting (if not more interesting) than the music of immediate gratification. Listening to music is no different than studying the great geometries of Euclid and Lobachevsky, or engaging the formulae of organic chemistry or civil engineering. Why music is approached as some privileged access to inner meaning is understandable but misleading. If music is understood in the aforementioned context, it is indistinguishable from philosophy, mathematics, or religion. It has been said that Hinduism, for example is the oldest living

religion (that is, it has remained fairly unchanged for centuries). No, music is the oldest religion. Music is present in all religions because of its inherent ability to transcend the mundane or, more precisely, make the familiar unfamiliar. As long as there have been humans communicating in a specifically non-linguistic sense, there has been music. The musician is at once priest, Brahmin, mullah and rabbi. Perhaps this is why musicians, like philosophers, have always been seen as potentially transgressive and, worse, the subtlest and most effective of educators. Philosophers such as Plato and Hegel nervously recognized this fact and treated music accordingly.

Achieving musical insight is no different from achieving an appreciation of language or science. It requires patience and concentration. Additionally, the greater the musical insight, the greater the listener has of achieving conversational insight. In other words, your ability to truly listen to music builds and maintains your ability to be a good conversationalist, something tragically absent in our postmodern age.

Following from this, we must seriously engage what the musician produces, not what the musician intends to produce. We can never acquire certainty by referencing the musician. Musicians are notoriously mercurial when it comes to the issue of intention. At best they are consistent, and at worse they are facetious and contradictory. Interpreters of music (and this includes you, the audience) are like translators of ancient texts; they will never get it completely right, but if they go about it right, they will not get it wrong.

Here are some practical tools to use when listening to any piece of music, whether it is blues, classical, rap, industrial, etc.

1). Concentrate—Recent polls (although scientifically unsound, no pun intended) have demonstrated that the majority of people who listen to music do so in their cars.

WRONG. Study calculus, chemistry or physics while negotiating the unfriendly and commonly idiotic driving habits of your fellow citizens. This is considered socially irresponsible and worthy of a felony. Extend the same consideration to an important piece of music. And the only way you can determine if it is important is to listen to it, free of distraction and the annoyances of commonplace existence.

2). Free yourself from the tickle and grin syndrome, a malaise so often cited by non-listeners for justifying mediocrity as great art. It tickles me, makes me feel good, and makes me grin—it must be great music. Liking music is not a solid basis for claiming that whatever you like is good; millions of people like Big Macs, but alas...To be sure, some of the greatest music produced is difficult and undigestible, and requires repeated listenings to comprehend. The weak way of putting this proposition follows: challenge yourself.

3). Listen for dynamics. The speed of a piece of music frequently sets the mood, for instance. The presence of various shades of tonality also goes a long way in communicating something about the piece. When listening to music, think of the piece as a conversation (or argument). Is anything being said? If so, is it worth your time to listen to it? After all, in our daily lives, small talk can be tedious and boring. Most popular music, whether classical, bluegrass, folk, pop, rap etc. is merely idle chatter. Interesting innovations, structural reconsiderations, and overall ingenuity in music is rare, but when discovered, is immensely rewarding. All music shares this.

4). Listen for extremes (this follows from above). Composers of all styles of music have a fondness for juxtaposing extremes (e.g. light and dark moods, loud and soft tones). If there is exaggeration in a musical presentation, does it work? If there is no exaggeration, does it work? Does the absence of extremes work? By the way, do not be fooled by technical virtuosity. More often than not it is an indication of a performer abjectly bored by numerous rehearsals or, worse yet, attempting to find a place in music history by throwing themselves into a fit of pyrotechnical exhibitionism. When I listen to and rehearse certain Romantic composers, I frequently ask myself: nice work out for the hands, but where is the music?

5). Imagination is the greatest tool for achieving musical insight. I have saved the best for last. Again, likeability and emotional response to music is important but not essential for comprehending the unfamiliar territory of, say, modern music. Great music frees the useful mind from the practical. Your imagination is essential in understanding music, and this faculty is retarded (if not completely suspended) when attending to practicality. The waking world we occupy is one rife with the urge to sleepwalk. If this is so, then music is the waking experience of an aesthetic dream with all of the attendant problems that go along with dreaming.

Imagination is a subjective phenomenon. But it is informed by objective circumstances, and for our purposes, great music (as an objective phenomenon) cultivates and molds a stronger and richer imagination. From this consideration we can speculate on the enrichment of conversational ability, our tacit ability to communicate with each other, as a result of achieving musical insight. And it is when this insight is achieved, we can confidently claim that our subjective faculty of the imagination has been freed from the tyranny of another's imagination—that is, we can inaugurate a discourse which is uniquely our own and yet comprehensible to another.

But we must always regard such previous pronouncements with suspicion, and a critically informed ambivalence is always welcomed. When music is honestly engaged, with an ear bent towards the intellectual, as opposed to merely the aesthetic, we as listeners are furthered in our attempt to comprehend the bewilderingly multifaceted universe of the arts and humanity in general.

A definition of music:

Music occurs when a culture dreams aloud.

This is a strictly useless and unfamiliar definition, one befitting music and art in general.